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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 001980

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SUBJECT: NOTES FROM THE FIELD: MEDELLIN

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.5 B & D.

¶1. (C) Summary: Poloff visited Colombia's vibrant second city, Medellin, February 11-12. National Police commander Ruben Carrillo noted a continued downward trend in violent crime and a lack of recidivism on the part of reinserted former paramilitary fighters. Mayor Sergio Fajardo complained that the GOC lacked a coordinated plan to effectively implement reinsertions and did not provide Medellin with adequate resources for the task. Archbishop Alberto Giraldo was cautiously optimistic about an accord with the ELN guerrilla group but was pessimistic about negotiating with the FARC. End Summary.

¶2. (C) National Police (CNP) Brigadier General Ruben Carrillo, who assumed the post of Medellin division commander in November 2003, highlighted that February 10 had been the first day under his watch that no homicide had occurred in the metropolitan area. He said that virtually all forms of violent crime--with the exception of armed robberies of small businesses--continued to decline on a monthly basis. Carrillo cited excellent police-military cooperation and ongoing joint sweeps (large scale arrests) as keys in the dismantling of local guerrilla and paramilitary networks. Regarding the nearly 900 locally "reinserted" former fighters of the AUC paramilitary group's Cacique Nutibara Bloc, Carrillo stated that to date only four had been arrested on charges of carrying an illegal weapon.

¶3. (C) Archbishop Alberto Giraldo, a member of the Church's National Conciliation Commission (CCN), expressed cautious optimism about the potential for a peace accord with the ELN guerrilla group. He was skeptical, however, with regard to dialogue with the FARC. Giraldo noted that UN Special Envoy James LeMoine had been unable to start discussions with the FARC, claiming that LeMoine felt "used" by the guerrilla group. Giraldo called attention to the final statement of the early February annual meeting of the Colombian Episcopal Conference. The bishops announced that all individual Church contacts with illegal groups were undertaken in the name of the Church as a whole. Giraldo expressed satisfaction that violence against church officials and lay workers was down substantially in the past year, with the notable exception of the dioceses of Arauca (Arauca) and Tibu (Norte de Santander).

¶4. (C) Medellin Mayor Sergio Fajardo, a University of Wisconsin mathematics Ph.D. and a relative political novice, said the first reinsertion of former paramilitary fighters had been a success, but worried that the national government did not have a coordinated plan to organize and finance additional demobilizations. Regarding national peace process issues, Fajardo felt that the conditional parole bill currently in the Congress was likely to pass. When asked how local residents viewed negotiations with former fighters, Fajardo opined that the vast majority of Medellin residents would accept less on the punishment scale were it to guarantee an end to the conflict. He stressed, however, that he did not plan to speak out nationally on peace process issues. (Comment: Nevertheless, on February 15, Fajardo's government secretary, Alonso Salazar, publicly called for truth commissions and reparations by former fighters involved in the Medellin process. GOC Peace Commissioner Restrepo dismissed the call for truth commissions as "populist" and urged the Medellin government to work more closely with the GOC to implement a community-based reparation program. End Comment.)

¶5. (C) Fajardo planned to focus on job creation and improving education and infrastructure. He worried, however, that Medellin's traditional political elite would attempt to stymie his social agenda. Fajardo hails from a well-known local family, and was education secretary during part of then-Antioquia governor Alvaro Uribe's administration. He ran his mayoral campaign, however, as a political outsider by using the leftist "Indigenous Social Alliance" banner. Fajardo expressed respect for and friendship with Bogota Mayor Luis Eduardo Garzon, but stressed that he was not a member of Garzon's Polo Democratico Independiente (Independent Democratic Party). He was appreciative of ongoing USAID-financed democracy, transparency, and human rights programs in Medellin.

¶6. (C) Antioquia Governor Anibal Gaviria, who has no formal involvement in peace process issues, talked up potential foreign investment. He was particularly interested in promoting the timber industry. On the social side, he hoped

to redouble the department's youth nutrition program, which he described as a model for Latin America. He lamented that in spite of the prosperous picture painted by Medellin, some three million of Antioquia's five million residents lived in poverty, with one million in extreme poverty. (Comment: Gaviria's brother, Guillermo, the previous governor, was kidnapped by the FARC in 2002 and assassinated during a botched GOC rescue attempt in May 2003. Gaviria's rivals have launched a legal challenge to his election, arguing that Colombian law prevents a blood relative from subsequently holding the same office, unless the incumbent steps down one year prior to the election. Our interlocutors are mixed in their predictions as to how the courts might rule. End Comment.)

WOOD